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# Making News: the Sonzogno Affair (1875) and the Print Networks in Liberal Italy<sup>1</sup>

Silvia Valisa

“non sappiamo, se un giorno la storia e la cronaca ricorderanno il fatto della morte di Raffaele Sonzogno, e di chi lo uccise.”<sup>2</sup>

On September 20, 1870, Milanese patriot Raffaele Sonzogno walked through the Breccia di Porta Pia into Rome. That day, the troops of the Kingdom of Italy had succeeded in breaching the walls of the city, and Italy at last recovered its long-dreamed-of capital. According to Risorgimento lore, as he walked on the rubble Sonzogno was not holding a rifle, or a flag, like the other patriots: he was carrying rather a small printing workshop.<sup>3</sup> With it, the following day he proceeded to publish *La capitale*, the first Rome-based national newspaper.

“Of medium height [...] and shortsighted,” as author Roberto Mazzucco describes him in a historical novel inspired by his fate, Raffaele was an outspoken voice of the Italian democrats and one of the heirs to the Sonzogno printing dynasty.<sup>4</sup> It is the irony of Raffaele’s destiny that, although he died many years before his influential brother Edoardo, who developed the most important publishing trust in nineteenth-century Italy, we know so much more about Raffaele’s private and public life than we will ever know about Edoardo. This is because only five years after the foundation of *La capitale*, on the evening of Saturday February 6, 1875, Raffaele Sonzogno was attacked and murdered at the headquarters of his newspaper, located in Via Cesarini 77. The homicide, first investigated as a random act then as a crime related to matters of adultery, soon turned out to be also professionally motivated, and related to Sonzogno’s public friendships, enmities, and to some of the most important political debates of its time. Raffaele Sonzogno thus became, first with his newspaper voice and then with the “processo celebre” that

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<sup>2</sup> *Processo dibattimento e sentenza contro gli assassini di Raffaele Sonzogno* (Rome: Paravia, 1875), 5.

<sup>3</sup> The most detailed account of Sonzogno’s journey to Rome is in Francesco Giarelli, *Vent’anni di giornalismo (1868–1888)* (Codogno: Cairo, 1896). Other accounts—Paolo Murialdi, *Storia del giornalismo italiano* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996), 69; Mauro Forno, *Informazione e potere. Storia del giornalismo italiano* (Bari: Laterza, 2012), 34; and Laura Barile, *Il secolo (1865–1923). Storia di due generazioni della democrazia lombarda* (Milan: Guanda, 1980), 29—are shorter and vary in details, but agree on the main event. Among the most reliable sources on Raffaele Sonzogno’s life overall is Telesforo Sarti’s *I rappresentanti del Piemonte e d’Italia: nelle tredici legislature del regno* (Rome: Paolini, 1880).

<sup>4</sup> *I sicari di Trastevere* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2013). Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the Italian are mine. Mazzucco originally wrote the story as a script for a 1975 RAI TV “sceneggiato” (mini-series) directed by Alberto Negrin, *Processo per l’uccisione di Raffaele Sonzogno giornalista romano*, broadcast the same year and currently available on Youtube.

followed, an important political symbol for the Left, and the protagonist of one of the most mediatized scandals of post-Unification Italy.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to condense the event and its importance, given the complexity of the political and cultural climate out of which it arose. In this essay I will discuss the case of Sonzogno from the standpoint of media and cultural history, in terms of how this affair was represented by the organs of the press at the time, in particular the democratic press, and more broadly in terms of what the Sonzogno murder and assassins' trial may tell us about the print networks of the time. I offer two main readings, one ideological and one more material: on the one hand, I discuss the presence and shadow of Giuseppe Garibaldi and his Risorgimento legacy over these events (a rhetorical presence, but also a very literal one). On the other, I consider the role that the written-word networks (newspapers, books, periodicals) played in the construction of Raffaele Sonzogno as a democratic hero, a modern mediatized victim, and an object of commercial exploitation after his murder and during and after the trial of his assassins.

Both elements help us decode the function that this affair came to have in the rhetorical construction of Unified Italy, especially in terms of its left-leaning Risorgimental core. And it is to this core, symbolically embodied by the figure of Garibaldi, the hero of the Italian Unification, that I also return in the last part, to discuss the dynamics of the murder and the other two protagonists of the affair, the person behind the homicide, Giuseppe Luciani, and the material executor, Pio Frezza. I want to understand how their different forms of *garibaldianism* become different forms of citizenship and of political participation. While Giuseppe Luciani embodies the transition from idealist patriot to corrupt politician, Pio Frezza's trajectory represents the fate of the illiterate majority, and their exploitation on the part of both the press and the political system. I argue that Frezza's brief moment of political visibility does not enable him to intervene critically in the discursive realm of the Italian "imagined community," to use Benedict Anderson's famous definition of the nationalist discourse.<sup>6</sup> Rather, his patriotism is manipulated to force him to "make" the news—to wordlessly, violently force his way into the printed world.

The main source of my analysis is the Milan-based newspaper *Il secolo-Gazzetta di Milano*, directed by Raffaele's brother, Edoardo Sonzogno.<sup>7</sup> Founded in 1866, *Il secolo* had by 1875 reached a national circulation of 25,000–30,000 copies a day, making it by far the most popular newspaper in the country.<sup>8</sup> Its success was due to several factors which can be summarized as a

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<sup>5</sup> The government of Italy had already been plagued by mishaps and scandals, much publicized in the national papers. Among the most egregious ones, in 1869 the Sonzognos had covered the "questione della Regia dei Tabacchi e la questione Lobbia" (Barile, *Il secolo*, 25). For a famous murder trial that followed the Sonzogno affair, see Thomas Simpson, *Murder and Media in the New Rome. The Fadda Affair* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). While Simpson does not directly reference the Sonzogno affair, many of the media strategies and print networks he details are similar in the two cases.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> The most accurate history of *Il secolo*, which also touches upon the development of *La capitale*, is in Barile, *Il secolo*; see also Stefano Merli's entry on *Il secolo* in *I periodici di Milano. Bibliografia e storia (1860–1904)* (Milan: Feltrinelli 1956), 10–27, and Franco Nasi, *100 anni di quotidiani milanesi*, (Milan: Quaderni della città di Milano, 1958), 25–50. Earlier sources (in addition to Giarelli) are Dario Papa, *Il giornalismo. Revista estera ed italiana* (Verona: Franchini, 1880), 266, and Nicola Bernardini, *Guida della stampa periodica italiana*. (Lecce: Tip. Salentina, 1880), 108, 113. The first seventeen years of *Il secolo* can be consulted online at <http://ilsecolo.lib.fsu.edu/>.

<sup>8</sup> Papa recorded the circulation figures for the most important periodicals in each city relative to the late 1870s (265–66). The highest ones (after *Il secolo*'s 30,000 copies) belonged to *Il popolo romano* (Rome 12,500), *Il messaggero* (Rome, 12,000), the *Gazzetta d'Italia* (Florence 12,000), the Neapolitan *Il Pungolo* (12,000), and the *Gazzetta del popolo* (Turin, 10,000). *Il secolo*'s direct competitors lagged behind: *Il corriere della sera* (Milan, 7,800), *Il pungolo*

combination of novelty and accessibility: priced very low (five *centesimi* in Milan, seven everywhere else in Italy), written in a more colloquial style than conservative newspapers, *Il secolo* was the first daily to hire *cronisti*, that is, people sent on site to report on crimes and important events.<sup>9</sup> It was also the first Italian daily to rely directly on the telegraph, an innovation that allowed the paper to gather national and international news in the shortest time possible, bypassing the historic agency Stefani—“l’agenzia di stampa ufficiosa del regno sardo” [“the unofficial press agency of the Kingdom of Sardinia”]—and other press sources.<sup>10</sup>

As part of its city-specific correspondences, ever since 1870 (i.e., since the transfer of the capital to Rome, and the foundation of *La capitale*), *Il secolo* hosted each day, on its front page, a column entitled “Lettere romane” [“Roman letters”] whose author was the Roman correspondent of the paper, someone affiliated with both Sonzognos, possibly *La capitale*’s own redactor in chief, Filandro Colacito, or a Roman freelancer close to *La capitale*. Through the “Lettere” in *Il secolo*, as well as from reports published by *La capitale*, we get a clear sense of what was happening in Rome in the days that preceded Raffaele’s murder, and the issues that the Sonzognos deemed especially worthy of the public’s attention.

### **Creating a Martyr: Garibaldi, Sonzogno, and the Risorgimento Rhetoric of Sacrifice**

The most important event of those days was Garibaldi’s long-awaited visit to the capital. It was the first time the “eroe dei due mondi” [“Hero of The Two Worlds”] set foot in Rome since his leading role in the short-lived Repubblica Romana, in 1849. When he disembarked from the train at Termini station on Monday January 25, 1875 a huge crowd welcomed him as a living icon. *Il secolo* reported on his arrival at length, including the words Garibaldi addressed to the crowd from the balcony of his hotel, and the public’s irrepressible enthusiasm, expressed by the “applausi frenetici” [“frenetic applause”] that constantly interrupted him.<sup>11</sup>

While the reins of the country were then in the hands of the conservative Destra, the passions stirred by Garibaldi’s arrival made clear, at least in the coverage offered by *La capitale* and *Il secolo*, that the democratic patriotism and commitment to the Risorgimento nationalist ideals were very much alive. In the following days, in fact, the coverage of Garibaldi’s visit in *Il secolo* became more directly political, working to emphasize the contrast between these Risorgimento ideals and the compromised reality of the right-wing governing majority and the Prime Minister, Minghetti. On January 31, for example, the “Lettere romane” informed the readers about one of the goals of Garibaldi’s legislative visit: the general was meeting technicians and politicians to promote a project dear to his heart, which included the reclamation [“risanamento”] of the marshy Roman countryside [“agro romano”], the excavation of a channel for the Tiber river, and the creation of a port for Rome.

In that correspondence, as well as in the following ones, Garibaldi was sketched in stark contrast to the politicians he met:

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(Milan, 7,500), and *La perseveranza* (Milan, 3,000). In 1875 Raffaele’s paper, *La capitale* was selling about 6,000 copies a day (Papa, 265)—although, according to Barile, by 1877 its circulation had greatly increased (57, n.74).

<sup>9</sup> Laura Barile, “Edoardo Sonzogno, editore del popolo,” in *Elite e divulgazione nell’editoria italiana dall’unità al fascismo* (Bologna: CLUEB, 1991), 49–64, 57. See also Nicola Tranfaglia and Albertina Vittoria, *Storia degli editori italiani: dall’unità alla fine degli anni Sessanta* (Bari: Laterza, 2007), 79.

<sup>10</sup> Giovanni Paoloni, “L’infrastruttura del moderno: il telegrafo” in *La cultura italiana*, edited by Luigi Luca Cavalli Sforza, Vol. IV, *Economia e Comunicazione* (Turin: UTET, 2009), 362–379, 366.

<sup>11</sup> *Il secolo*, Tuesday–Wednesday, January 26–27 1875, N.3149, “Lettere romane. L’arrivo di Garibaldi,” 1–2.

Come già vi scrissi, il governo pare in questi giorni disposto ad aiutare con ogni sua possa l'attuazione del progetto del canale del Tevere ideato dal generale Garibaldi. Siamo perciò nel periodo degli abboccamenti, delle strette di mano e dei sorrisi, [...] Il primo [Garibaldi] lealissimo e generoso sempre, vagheggiando un'idea [sic] che gli pare vantaggiosa alla patria, ha fatto ciò che sempre fece in casi simili, soffocò i suoi sentimenti personali, desideroso di rivolgere tutte le [sic] forze utili all'esecuzione dell'impresa da lui ideata; i secondi [i nostri signori governanti], non desiderano di meglio che di vedere concentrato in una questione d'interesse economico, un'influenza che esercitata in campo politico, potrebbe recar loro pericoli e danni gravissimi.

[As I wrote to you earlier, these days the government appears inclined to help carry out by all his means the project of the canal for the Tiber river that general Garibaldi is proposing. We are thus in the phase of interviews, handshakes and smiles. [...] The former [Garibaldi], who is extremely loyal and always generous, having come up with an idea that seems to him to be advantageous to the country, did what he has always done in these circumstances: he put aside his personal feelings, eager as he is to direct all of his worthwhile strength to carrying out the initiative he conceived. The latter ones [our governing lords] do not wish anything better than to see his influence focused on a matter of economic interest, since, were he to direct it in the political realm, it could imperil their power and cause them great damage.]<sup>12</sup>

Garibaldi was portrayed as a hero ready to tackle the problems of the unified country with the same idealism and abnegation he brought to the Italian Unification. His opponents (labeled with the derisive “our governing lords”) were described as opportunistically tagging along to reap the financial and political benefits of the project, glad to keep Garibaldi’s influence away from more substantial matters.<sup>13</sup>

If this excerpt was typical of the rhetorical outline of the General in *Il secolo*, in that his post-Unification spirit was always defined in continuity with his revolutionary past, it is also important to note that, in the days preceding Raffaele’s death, the coverage of Garibaldi’s Roman stay was an occasion to extend onto other figures the same honorific rhetoric, and to emphasize in particular the Sonzogno brothers’ affinity with the general’s principles, both during and after the Risorgimento. On February 4, *La capitale* gave great prominence in its front page to “La visita del direttore della *Capitale* al gen. Garibaldi” [“The visit of *La capitale*’s director to General Garibaldi”] Raffaele Sonzogno’s own visit to the general at Villa Severini, together with his redactor in chief, Filandro Colacito.<sup>14</sup> At the opening of the meeting, wrote the journalist, “Il generale ringraziò anzi tutto con molta benevolenza il signor Raffaele Sonzogno per quanto aveva fatto colla *Capitale*. Sonzogno rispondeva di non aver fatto che il suo dovere” [“The General, first and foremost, thanked with much benevolence Mr. Raffaele Sonzogno for all he had done with his *La capitale*. Sonzogno replied he had just done his duty”]. After Garibaldi

<sup>12</sup> *Il secolo*, Friday–Saturday, February 5–6, 1875, N.3159; “Lettere romane. Minghetti, Garibaldi, Brioschi,” 1.

<sup>13</sup> In the Tuesday–Wednesday, February 2–3 issue, the correspondent also pondered the slim chances that the project would ever come to fruition, given that three different authorities would be in charge: the Roman municipality, the Roman province, and the State. The project was never approved. (N.3156; “Lettere romane. Garibaldi, il senatore Rosa e il Municipio romano,” 2).

<sup>14</sup> The account, redacted either by Raffaele himself or Colacito, was also printed in *Il secolo* on the 6th.

explained in detail his “risanamento” plan to the two men, “[l]a conversazione si aggirò poi su altri argomenti, sulla stampa, sul giornalismo italiano, e il generale ebbe parole lusinghiere per i nostri giornali di Milano e di Roma, incaricandoci di salutare il fratello Edoardo” [“the conversation then turned towards other topics, such as the print business and Italian journalism. The General had flattering words for our newspapers in Milan and Rome, and left us in charge of greeting Raffaele’s brother, Edoardo”].<sup>15</sup>

The account was fashioned as a reminder to the readers that both the polemical director of *La capitale* and his brother Edoardo were personally connected to the general, and had supported him for a long time. Indeed, Raffaele had earned his moral and rhetorical superiority against his press and political adversaries via his Garibaldian past: as readers could gather from Sonzogno’s first political memoir, *I prigionieri di Josefstadt. Memorie storiche del 1859* (published by his father’s typography, Lorenzo Sonzogno, in 1860), Sonzogno, as a young journalist working for the Austrian newspaper *La gazzetta ufficiale di Milano* in 1859, had been arrested by the Austrians and sent to the infamous Josefstadt prison on charges of espionage.

It was, perhaps unsurprisingly, along the rhetoric of this patriotic self-sacrifice, and of the hero’s full dedication to the republican, democratic cause, that the image of Raffaele Sonzogno came to be modeled in the days that followed his death, and during the trial against his murderers that took place in October and November of the same year. The issue of *Il secolo* from February 9–10, the first one to reflect substantially on the tragedy, featured on its front page three reports from Rome (Fig. 1): the second part of the “Ultimo scritto di Raffaele Sonzogno” [“Last piece by Raffaele Sonzogno”]—the editorial Sonzogno was literally writing when he was killed—, the daily correspondence “Lettere romane,” and the first detailed account of the murder, “Particolari dell’assassinio di R. Sonzogno” [“Details about R. Sonzogno’s murder”]. This second installment of Raffaele’s “Ultimo scritto,” entirely dedicated to Garibaldi, opened with a quote from Garibaldi’s most recently published work, the highly polemical *I Mille* (1874), which was then expanded upon in terms of patriotic ethics:

“Far il bene della patria è la nostra repubblica.” Questo principio, che domina Garibaldi, ne spiega tutte le azioni. Oggi se per fare il bene della patria fa bisogno andar a vedere il re, egli andrà a vedere il re; quando egli ha la coscienza di servire agli interessi del paese, egli non ascolta mai l’io. Egli è l’uomo del sacrificio per eccellenza.

[“To work for the country’s greater good is our republic.” This principle, which drives Garibaldi, explains all his actions. Today, if it is necessary to go see the king for the country’s greater good, he will go see the king. When he is consciously serving the country’s interests, he never listens to his *ego*. He is the man of sacrifice par excellence.]<sup>16</sup>

While to some the General appeared to mingle excessively with the current government, Raffaele argued, Garibaldi’s actions were to be understood from a higher standpoint, that

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<sup>15</sup> *Il secolo*, Saturday–Sunday, February 6–7, 1875, N.3160; “La visita del direttore della *Capitale* al gen. Garibaldi.”

<sup>16</sup> *Il secolo*, Monday–Tuesday February 8–9, 1875, N.3162, “Ultimo scritto di Raffaele Sonzogno,” 1.

of his patriotic devotion, which in turn was aided by his pragmatism, his selflessness and abnegation.<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 1. *Il secolo*, Tuesday–Wednesday February 9–10, 1875, N.3163, “Ultimo scritto di Raffaele Sonzogno, *Cont. e fine. V. num. d’ieri*,” 1.

On the same front page, under the heading “Particolari dell’assassinio di R. Sonzogno,” Raffaele was mourned by his journalistic network in a very similar tone: “se pure Raffaele Sonzogno avesse avuto dei difetti, rimase altamente purificato con una vita di abnegazione, di virtù, di sacrificio” [“even if Raffaele Sonzogno might’ve had some faults, he remained purified from them by leading a life of abnegation, virtue and sacrifice”].<sup>18</sup> And during the weeks that followed, while the press published every detail of the ongoing police investigation, Raffaele was celebrated in *Il secolo* as the most eloquent example of Risorgimento values: his spirit of sacrifice, his love of truth, and his advocacy for justice recurred consistently. On February 11–12, the transport of Raffaele’s body to Termini station for his last trip to Milan, where it would be buried, was described with the same rhetoric of popular participation and bipartisan enthusiasm that just two weeks earlier had been reserved for Garibaldi’s arrival at Termini:

<sup>17</sup> On the Risorgimento legacy of sacrificial rhetoric see also Alberto Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell’Italia unita* (Milan: Einaudi 2006).

<sup>18</sup> *Il secolo*, Monday–Tuesday February 8–9, 1875, N.3162, “Particolari dell’assassinio di R. Sonzogno,” 1. In between “Ultimo scritto” and “Particolari” there was the daily “Lettere romane.” It covered the murder only in part, tying it to the local context.

Tutta la popolazione volle prender parte ai funebri onori del nostro concittadino, ch'essa da oltre quattro anni vide sempre al lavoro, sempre sulla breccia a difendere i diritti del popolo e della libertà. Anche coloro che dissentivano da lui, compresero, oggi ch'ei non è più, quanto spirito di abnegazione e di sacrificio vi era in quell'anima febbricitante per amore irrefrenabile di giustizia.

[The entire population took part to the last homage to our fellow citizen, whom for the past four years they saw always busy at work, always at the forefront to defend the rights of the people and their freedom. Even those who disagreed with him understood, now that he is gone, how much spirit of abnegation and sacrifice his soul contained—a soul feverish in its love for justice.]<sup>19</sup>

In the same issue, the description of the deceased's photograph, taken after his death, concluded that “il volto di Raffaele Sonzogno non serba che l'impronta del martire” [“Raffaele Sonzogno's face only retains the imprint of the martyr”].<sup>20</sup>

This discursive commitment to Raffaele's integrity and patriotic devotion remained relevant while, on October 19, the “Dibattimento in Assise” [“Public proceedings of the trial”] of Sonzogno's murderers started, and the complicated web of Raffaele's life was brought into the open. Among the editorial initiatives of the Sonzognos, the decision to reprint, in early October, Raffaele's second book of memoirs, his *Memorie politiche*, originally published in 1870, was among the most publicized and visible. In the preface appended to the *Memorie* in 1875, Sonzogno was defended from the accusations of anti-patriotism that had resurfaced right before his death and during the trial—accusations to which I will return in the final part of this essay. The charges were strenuously denied, and he was exalted once more as “il soldato caduto sulla breccia combattendo per una santa bandiera” [“the soldier fallen in the frontline fighting for a holy flag”].<sup>21</sup> The *Memorie* were simultaneously translated by Sonzogno into French and distributed via *Il secolo's* French office to create a favorable connection with the foreign press.<sup>22</sup>

This set of editorial operations allowed the Sonzognos, and the Italian Democrats with them, to build their ideological celebration of Raffaele in continuity with the Risorgimental past, and to build a leftist identity around him. Laura Barile, in her history of *Il secolo*, argues that Raffaele's death “lasciò a Edoardo l'eredità di proseguire su quella via democratica cui egli aveva votato la propria vita” [“left Edoardo the legacy to continue along the democratic path to which Raffaele had devoted his life”].<sup>23</sup> Edoardo's *Il secolo*, born as a more moderate daily than Raffaele's *La capitale* (but also more moderate than the paper Raffaele directed in Milan after the Unification and until 1870, *La Gazzetta di Milano*), had indeed gradually assimilated Raffaele's model and orientation. It carried on his ideological legacy for decades to come, under the founder, Edoardo, and under its idealist director, Ernesto Teodoro Moneta, who directed *Il secolo* from 1869 to 1895 and who would go on to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1907.

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<sup>19</sup> *Il secolo*, Thursday–Friday February 11–12, 1875, N.3165; “I funerali,” 2.

<sup>20</sup> Idem, “Le fotografie di Raffaele Sonzogno,” 2.

<sup>21</sup> Raffaele Sonzogno, *Memorie politiche scritte dal medesimo* (Milan: Sonzogno, 1875), IV.

<sup>22</sup> Raphaël Sonzogno, *Mémoires politiques* (Paris: À la librairie illustrée, 1875).

<sup>23</sup> Barile, *Il secolo*, 57.



## Printing Justice: The “Processo celebre” and its Press Accounts

This celebratory narrative model was not, though, the only paradigm along which Raffaele’s life and deeds came to be told. A more thorough account of how the Italian printed media handled the Sonzogno affair needs to consider the diverging narratives produced in trial publications. And it also needs to acknowledge the complex reality of Sonzogno’s commercial life: in particular, his roles as both pioneer and victim of a commercial printing business based upon indulging the taste of the audiences. Whereas, in other words, his *Memorie politiche* and Sonzogno’s newspaper coverage of both the crime and the trial participated in the same hagiographic commitment that had characterized the narratives shaped around Risorgimento figures, in the many other publications about the Caso Sonzogno that flooded the market in 1875, it was the criminal details, and Sonzogno’s political ambiguities, that were exposed to the public.

Before and during the Assise trial in Rome the media interest was at its peak: “non potete farvi idea dell’interesse europeo, per non dire mondiale, che ha sollevato questo dramma giudiziario d’imminente rappresentazione” [“you cannot imagine the European interest, indeed the world interest, that this impending judiciary drama elicited”].<sup>24</sup> In addition to the great affluence of the general public, it was unclear how the countless press correspondents that asked for access to the tribunal room could be accommodated. The solution was literally to redistribute the space in the courtroom: when the trial started, on October 19, the portion devoted to judges, defendants, and jurors had been reduced so that a semicircular table for the local press and a smaller table for the note-takers sent by *La capitale* could be added in the middle of the room.<sup>25</sup>

The traditional court space was deemed insufficient, or inadequate, to accommodate the spectacular modernity of Sonzogno’s life and death, and the relevance that the case acquired for citizens of all classes, and journalists from different countries. In discussing the evolution of the criminal trial and the interaction between the judiciary system, journalism, and the public opinion, Luigi Lacchè explores the fashion of trial literature and of crime narratives that developed in Italy and Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> He argues that in the “processi celebri,” the instances of democratization of the judicial process that were at work in most European nations were combined with the people’s intense curiosity for the judicial experience and the public management of crime (467). The Sonzogno trial is an early and eminent example of the development of this performative relationship between press and justice in Italy, and of the role of journalism and of the print market in the juridical context of the time.<sup>27</sup>

On the first day of the trial, *La capitale* listed 27 press organs as present, arguing that there were probably even more.<sup>28</sup> From the Assise room each of the correspondents sent daily

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<sup>24</sup> *Il secolo*, Monday–Tuesday October 11–12, N.3403, “Lettere romane. Nostra corrispondenza,” 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Il secolo*, October 20, 1875, “Lettere romane,” 1.

<sup>26</sup> Luigi Lacchè, “Una letteratura alla moda. Opinione pubblica, “processi infiniti” e pubblicità in Italia tra Otto e Novecento.” In *Riti, tecniche, interessi. Il processo penale tra otto e novecento. Atti del convegno (Foggia, 5–6 maggio 2006)* edited by Marco Nicola Minetti (Milan: Giuffrè, 2006), 459–513, 468.

<sup>27</sup> On the mediatization and commodification of the judicial process, see also Simpson’s introduction to his discussion of the Fadda “circus,” from 1879, and chapter 1. (Simpson, *Murder and Media in the New Rome*, 1–25).

<sup>28</sup> The list of press organs present offered in the trial transcription published by *La capitale* is as follows: behind the “stenografi” of *La capitale*, who wrote down the account of the entire trial in short hand, sat “the resocontisti dei vari giornali di Roma, i quali sono disposti nell’ordine seguente: *Voce della Verità, Diritto, Capitale, Italie, Opinione, Libertà, Fanfulla, Popolo Romano*. Dietro la stampa locale ed un gradino più basso dell’impalcatura su cui stanno la corte, il giuri e gli accusati, è lo spazio riservato ai testimoni, dopo il quale un banco trasversale, che occupa quasi tutta la larghezza della sala, è destinato ai corrispondenti dei giornali italiani ed esteri, i quali nel primo giorno del processo, trovavansi disposti nell’ordine seguente: *Indépendance Belge – Liberté – Gazzetta di*

dispatches. The victim's newspaper, *La capitale*, was accorded the right to transcribe the entirety of the trial, which was published as such after the sentence.<sup>29</sup> Several of the other periodicals also later gathered their accounts in book format, sold as a supplement to the periodical or as an independent product, often with a preface that exposed the particular angle taken by the editors. In these publications, Sonzogno's former judicial history, his foundering marriage, and his political passions were exposed and discussed, as were the lives and deeds of the defendants: Giuseppe Luciani, the man who had commissioned the murder; Pio Frezza, the man who had actually carried it out; and the four other men (Michele Armati, Luigi Morelli, Cornelio Farina, and Salvatore Scarpetti) tried as accomplices.<sup>30</sup>

Each of these publications reported the trial in terms compatible with their ideological orientation. While it was common to include a prefatory note attesting to the impartiality of the account, these protestations were no less rhetorically charged than the Risorgimental frame offered by the Sonzogno publications. An exemplary case was *Appunti e note sul processo Sonzogno*, which appeared in Venice in the spring–summer 1875, while the “istruttoria” was still gathering depositions.<sup>31</sup> The author Marco Vestegio, a journalist for the Venice-based daily *Il Rinnovamento*, provided a biography of the victim and of the man accused of plotting the murder, and included a chronology of the murder as it was being reconstructed by the police investigators.<sup>32</sup> Vestegio's account was, by his own admission, a summary—“un riassunto esatto e fedele”—of indirect sources, that is of the articles that were being published on the Sonzogno case “nei pubblici diarii più accreditati d'Italia e di fuori, l'*Opinione*, la *Libertà*, l'*Italie*, il *Figaro* di Parigi, la *Neue Freie Presse* di Vienna” [“in the most respected newspapers of Italy and elsewhere, the *Opinione*, the *Libertà*, the *Italie*, the *Figaro* in Paris, the *Neue Freie Presse* in Vienna”] (*Appunti e note*, 47). Moreover, while describing himself as an “impartial historian,” he exclusively relied on conservative periodicals as his sources. In order to introduce *La capitale*, Vestegio quoted verbatim a description of the daily that had been published in the Paris daily *Le Temps* earlier that year, in which *La capitale* was deemed a secondhand source for national and

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*Francoforte – Il Secolo di Milano – Il Precursore di Palermo – Corrispondenza Italo-Germanica – Gazzetta d'Italia – Sentinella Bresciana – Daily News – Daily Telegraph – Times – Avvenire di Sardegna – Neue Freie Press – Le Siècle [sic] – Correspondance Franco Italienne – Perserveranza – Nazione – Gazzetta di Napoli –; Gazzetta di Mosca, ecc., ecc.”* *Processo Luciani e coimputati per l'assassinio di Raffaele Sonzogno*, published by *La Capitale*, 1–2.

<sup>29</sup> *Processo Luciani e coimputati per l'assassinio di Raffaele Sonzogno commesso in Roma il 6 febbrajo 1875. Dibattutosi il giorno 19 ottobre 1875 e seguenti: davanti all'Assisie di Roma. Rendiconto stenografico pubblicato per cura della Direzione del giornale La Capitale* (Rome 1875).

<sup>30</sup> Among the many publications emerging during and after the trial was the *Processo, dibattimento e sentenza contro gli assassini di Raffaele Sonzogno* published by Paravia, which reported the October trial, but also the entire text of the June sentence by the Correctional Tribunal of Rome, where the accusations against the six men were formalized. Other publications include the *Processo per l'assassinio Sonzogno*, published by the Roman publisher and bookseller Capaccini (1875), close to the journalists of *La capitale*; the *Processo per l'assassinio di Raffaele Sonzogno contro Luciani, Frezza e coimputati Armati, Scarpetti, Morelli e Farina*, published by F. Pagnoni, and the *Resoconto del processo per l'assassinio Sonzogno*, published by the Tipografia della *Gazzetta d'Italia*, historically opposed to Sonzogno. The juridical periodical *Il diritto* also published its account in installments and later in book format. Among the foreign press, in addition to the translations of the trial transcription, the French newspaper *L'illustration* summed up the story defending Raffaele's work and life in its November 13 issue, and on November 21 the Danish Magazine *Illustreret tidende* devoted four columns to the trial and its outcome. Swiss journalist Wylhelm von Wymetal reported the entire process from Rome for Zurich's *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, which published it in book format in 1876.

<sup>31</sup> Marco Vestegio, *Appunti e note sul processo Sonzogno*. “Estratto da giornale Il Rinnovamento.” Venice: Stab. tip. del Rinnovamento, 1875.

<sup>32</sup> Vestegio, *Appunti e note*, 9.

international news, and a sort of “gossip-collector” of Rome’s local events.<sup>33</sup> Also, in the only example of recourse to primary material, Vestegio attached to his *Appunti* four letters penned by Sonzogno in 1859, which had been at the center of a contentious judicial case between the daily *La perseveranza* and Raffaele Sonzogno in 1869. Vestegio’s choice to reproduce the letters functioned to implicitly support the accusations against Raffaele Sonzogno.<sup>34</sup>

In practice, then, the journalists’ protestations of impartiality often belied a counter-message to the Sonzognos’ hagiographic efforts. In addition, because a recent law had forbidden newspapers from publishing verbatim trial depositions and acts before the final sentence was made public, the media could only offer summaries of the day’s depositions during the Assise trial.<sup>35</sup> This was used strategically in some cases: when the conservative daily *La perseveranza*, one of *Il secolo*’s direct competitors in Milan, published a supplement devoted to the trial, the “digest” style of the *Perseveranza* account, which related only parts of the witnesses’ words, or summarized them, afforded enough flexibility to the redactors to gloss over moments in which the paper’s own role in the affair might have become too prominent.<sup>36</sup>

These examples sketch the quite polarized, and multifaceted, media context within which Sonzogno’s murder and his murderers’ trial came to be. The police investigation leading up to the trial, the preliminary tribunal findings, and the final Assise public proceedings and sentencing were the object of constant scrutiny, hurried interpretations, and contradictory transcripts and reports; the public’s curiosity for the case was exploited from all angles. Nor did the echo of the affair subside quickly. More than a decade later, publications such as *Processi celebri contemporanei italiani e stranieri*, a volume collecting digests of “processi celebri,” still included the Sonzogno murder trial among the most important juridical cases of the century.<sup>37</sup>

In this sense, the trial is an apt reflection of its times, and of the very conditions within which the Sonzognos’ thriving media empire came to exist: Raffaele and Edoardo Sonzogno’s careers had been built out of their savvy management of a complex set of ideological and commercial ambitions in the 1860s and 1870s. They were representatives of a progressive environment that, while taking advantage of the printing press to foster social improvement, was also devoted to a capitalist project of commercial expansion. In other words, their sincere faith, even in the post-Unification power-grabbing era, in democratic ideals, went hand in hand with an aggressive brand of journalism, and a modern exploitation of the newly created national market. For example, Raffaele’s newspaper printed daily in its front page, as did *Il secolo*, a “romanzo d’appendice,” or *feuilleton*, that is, a popular novel in installments, bound to increase readership

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<sup>33</sup> The author of *Le Temps*’s article against Sonzogno, Erdan, had already been denounced by Anatole de la Forge in the French democratic paper *Le Siècle*, and by the Sonzogno papers (*Il secolo* and *La Gazzetta di Milano*) as a pen-for-hire in earlier instances. In September 1869, for example, they accused Erdan of working at the bidding of the Right in both countries (in particular, with Minister Menabrea during the Regia affair, in 1869). *Il secolo*, “Il famoso signor Erdan” and “Il signor Erdan condannato dal SIECLE,” Thursday–Friday February 25–26 1875, N.3178, 1–2.

<sup>34</sup> Vestegio, *Appunti e note* 50–55.

<sup>35</sup> “Legge 8 giugno 1874 sull’ordinamento,” Art. 49. The article carried the “divieto di pubblicare gli atti dibattimentali e le notizie concernenti la giuria prima della sentenza definitiva.” Lacchè, 483.

<sup>36</sup> To give just one example, the request made to the court by Raffaele’s brother, Giulio Cesare, and the Sonzogno family lawyer, Tajani, to further investigate the publication of an anonymous anti-Sonzogno telegram in *La Perseveranza* on February 4th was cursorily summarized in the supplement, omitting the text of the telegram itself (read in full at the trial), and Tajani’s remarks about the potentially deliberate slowness of the investigation. *Processo per l’assassinio di Raffaele Sonzogno. Supplemento alla Perseveranza* (Milan: Stabilimento della Perseveranza, 1875).

<sup>37</sup> Oscar Pio and Nicola Argenti eds., *Processi celebri contemporanei italiani e stranieri raccolti ed esposti dagli avvocati Oscar Pio e Nicola Argenti* (Naples: Nicola Anfossi, 1889).

and sales.<sup>38</sup> The *feuilleton* was usually re-packaged as a separate publication, just like the trial accounts were, and advertised in the Sonzogno newspapers.

The brothers had also built their name, in the years immediately following the Unification, by carrying out highly confrontational press campaigns on specific local or national issues, for example the corruption of the Milanese *giunta* [“municipal council”] led by Antonio Beretta in 1867, which was supported by conservative periodicals such as *Il pungolo* and *La perseveranza*, directed by Leone Fortis and Ruggero Bonghi respectively. As Barile explains, writing on the Sonzognos’ attitude in the controversy, “in realtà l’opposizione al sindaco Beretta era diretta soprattutto contro i giornali che lo appoggiavano: il *Pungolo* e la *Perseveranza*. La battaglia politica quindi è in realtà intrecciata a faide giornalistiche cittadine” [“in fact, the opposition to mayor Beretta was mostly aimed at the newspapers that supported him, *Pungolo* and *Perseveranza*. The political battle is, therefore, intertwined with city journalistic feuds”].<sup>39</sup> The Sonzognos’ enmity against conservative papers dated from the early years of the Unified press landscape, when Raffaele was the director of the *Gazzetta di Milano* and a rising politician of the radical Left, and the visibility of a paper came to be built on such heated confrontations.

Lastly, *La capitale* and *Il secolo* were famous, or infamous, for being the first national newspapers that gave ample room to the local news, what we would now call the *cronaca locale*—local chronicle, i.e., sustained attention to reports of local events, disputes and crimes, a feature which later came to define *La capitale*’s ‘successor,’ the daily *Il messaggero*.<sup>40</sup> In the case of *La capitale* especially—and this is very important in our story—people from the lower classes of popular neighborhoods in Rome, such as Trastevere, were encouraged to visit the newspaper’s headquarters and to report to Raffaele Sonzogno and his employees facts, crimes, and misdemeanors that they deemed interesting to the public. According to his detractors, Sonzogno printed them as such, without verifying his sources, a fact that, again according to them, reflected his lack of professionalism.

In Vestegio’s transcription of *Le temps* this conduct was described as utterly irresponsible, especially when considered from the standpoint of the upper classes: “Esso aveva aperto i due quinti della sua cronaca, la parte che non rubava—ai *fatti privati*, alla voce del popolo, a tutte le osservazioni più o meno giuste, più o meno assurde che piaceva alla moltitudine di discutere seco lui nel suo ufficio. Licenziavate la vostra fantesca? Andrò a lagnarmene alla *Capitale*, vi rispondeva. E vi andava, e l’indomani trovavate nel giornale il vostro nome accompagnato da commenti certamente non aggradevoli” [“He had devoted two-fifths of its chronicle section, the part that he did not steal [from other papers]—to *private accounts*, to the voice of the people, to all of those observations more or less fair, more or less absurd that the multitude liked to discuss with him in his office. Did you fire your maid? I will go complain about it to the *Capitale*, she would reply. And she would go, and the following day you would find your name in the paper, accompanied by comments that were certainly not pleasant”].<sup>41</sup> As Barile notes, the very acrimony of the reactions to the Sonzognos’ methods belied “un contrasto di interessi” [“a clash of interests”] among the power players in the local and national press.<sup>42</sup> Yet it was precisely this

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<sup>38</sup> At the time of the murder, *Il secolo* was publishing *La tabacchiera del signor Lubin*, a novel by French author Constant Guérault.

<sup>39</sup> Barile, *Il secolo*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> See on this Vestegio 12–13, who quotes Erdan, 12–13, but also *L’illustration*, in which the same theme is treated in more favorable terms. On *La capitale* and the origins of *Il messaggero*, see also Pesci, *I primi anni di Roma capitale*, 483.

<sup>41</sup> Vestegio quoting *Le Temps*, his translation, 12–13.

<sup>42</sup> Barile, *Il secolo*, 43.

attention to the local scene and to the “voice of the people” that made *La capitale* one of the most widely read newspapers in Rome.

Ironically, then, Raffaele Sonzogno became posthumously the center of a web of editorial productions, book series, and trial transcriptions, that dramatized and made a spectacle of his life and his violent death, and that exploited the same interest in crime narratives and private details that his newspaper had contributed to spreading. As the founder of *La capitale*, Raffaele was both the active proponent of a closer relationship between journalism and crime reporting, and between journalism and the people, and the unwilling double victim of it: firstly as the victim of a murder whose political motive can be found spelled out in his newspaper and *Il secolo*’s “Lettere romane,” as I will explain in the next section, and, secondly, as the object of editorial exploitation on the part of colleagues and adversaries alike.

I use the word exploitation to denote the multiplication of media that emerge from this death and trial. But, once again, it would be unfair to qualify the media history of the Sonzogno affair as either/or—as a hagiographic monument or as a commercially oriented enterprise. The proliferation of media products originating from the Sonzogno affair attests, rather, to the existence of a well-established Italian publishing network, a network ready to debate nationally and internationally a public case such as this, and to construct diverging or mutually enriching narratives around the story of one man. As Simpson reminds us in his discussion of the Fadda murder, “we cannot separate an event from the mechanics of perception.”<sup>43</sup> The Sonzogno affair is then an emblematic case study of the multiple refractions and readings that a single event can give rise to when so many ideological and commercial interests converge upon it, and an example of the kind of imagined communities that the national press was creating (or failing to create) in these early post-Unification years.

According to Benedict Anderson’s analysis of the origins of nationalism, newspapers played a pivotal role in creating a consciousness of simultaneity and constructing “vernacularly imagined communities,” that is, communities organized around a broader (or narrower) than before linguistic *koiné*, and subsequently organized around a set of ideological principles, visual and rhetorical claims that came to define the idea of the nation.<sup>44</sup> While it is, of course, necessary to remind ourselves of the rather limited number of readers of newspapers like *Il secolo* and *La capitale* (Italians were 27 million in 1875; *Il secolo* sold 25,000–30,000 copies a day), it is also true, as Anderson points out, that this was precisely the moment in which readership was starting to grow: “everywhere, in fact, as literacy increased, it became easier to arouse popular support, with the masses discovering a new glory in the print elevation of languages they had humbly spoken all along” (80). At the same time, the Sonzogno murder becomes worthy of exploration because, far from simply restituting to us the imagined community of newspaper readers that were gathering around the Left Democrats, growing or not, it allows us to glance at the conflicts inside and outside of it, and ultimately, as well, at the non-reading majority, and at the kind of political and/or practical role that it held in those years.

### **Garibaldianism’s Dark Side: Politics, Murder, and Fake News**

While Raffaele Sonzogno’s trajectory has allowed me to focus on the celebratory rhetoric of Garibaldianism on the one hand, and the affair’s commercial exploitation on the other, it is impossible to understand fully the nature of, and motives behind, this murder without addressing

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<sup>43</sup> Simpson, *Murder and Media in the New Rome*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 79.

the tensions that can be found *within* the former, within Garibaldianism itself. It is essential, in other words, to consider the human and political dynamics that led to the actual crime, and to do so by focusing on the two subjects who were chiefly responsible for Raffaele's death on the Carnival night of February 6. Because what is striking, as we learn more about this murder, is that all three of its protagonists (Sonzogno as the victim, Luciani as the mind of the murder, and Pio Frezza as the arm) were equally and vehemently Garibaldian (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. From Wilhelm von Wymetal, "Mein Tagebuch im Prozess Sonzogno,"  
*Neuen Zürcher Zeitung*. Zurich, 1876 (n.p.).

Giuseppe Luciani, born in 1845, identified in the trial transcript as “scapolo pubblicista,” “a bachelor free-lance journalist,” was for a few years Raffaele Sonzogno’s closest friend and protégé.<sup>45</sup> A Garibaldian of the first hour, Luciani was imprisoned and confined several times for his revolutionary leanings during the Risorgimento years. He was also among the patriots entering Rome via the Breccia in 1870; his friendship with Sonzogno dated to that moment. Luciani’s ambitions were explicitly political, and between 1870 and 1874 Sonzogno used *La capitale* to support Luciani’s electoral bids, for example a first failed candidacy to an administrative seat in Rome in 1873.<sup>46</sup> But the discovery, on Raffaele’s part, of Luciani’s affair with Sonzogno’s young wife, who then proved to be carrying Luciani’s child, led Sonzogno (understandably) to break off their friendship. Sonzogno sued both his wife Emilia Comolli and Luciani for adultery, a crime that carried a potential jail sentence for Luciani; at the same time, he turned his print support into outspoken enmity. In November 1874, when Luciani was elected representative of the IV Roman district (*IV collegio*), Sonzogno supported and publicized an investigation that found Luciani and his associates guilty of electoral fraud (his associates had tampered the ballots) and stripped him of the seat. In early ‘75, when Luciani decided to compete for another seat, this time in the left-leaning neighborhood of Trastevere, Sonzogno again unleashed his and his brother’s dailies against him—especially because Luciani was out to take, literally, Garibaldi’s place.

Garibaldi’s presence in Rome at the time was due, together with his reclamation project, to a more directly political commitment: during the run-up to general elections in November 1874 he had been asked to be the democratic candidate in two Roman districts’ primaries, the 1st and the 5<sup>th</sup>—a double booking which was possible at the time. While he won both candidacies, he could not hold office in both. One of his two seats (that of the *V Collegio*) went back to “elezioni suppletive” to find a substitute democratic candidate, and Luciani put in his candidacy to become Garibaldi’s substitute. Raffaele Sonzogno discussed publicly the scheming that was taking place to grab the seat, and denounced Luciani’s maneuver to obtain the favor of the voters. In the “Lettere romane” dated February 4, *Il secolo*’s correspondent expressed his dismay that the electoral society chose Luciani over the more honest candidate, Francesco Cucchi (favored by Garibaldi himself), and condemned the “false democrats” that had biased the election.<sup>47</sup> A few weeks earlier Sonzogno had weighed in directly on the candidacy: “Interrogati da parecchi elettori di Trastevere ad esprimere il nostro parere sulla votazione di ballottaggio che deve aver luogo domenica, dichiariamo una volta per sempre che il nome del sig. Giuseppe Luciani, dinanzi alla nostra coscienza, non può rappresentare oggi nè mai il candidato della democrazia” [“Questioned by several voters of Trastevere to express our opinion about the ballot vote which will take place on Sunday, we declare once and for all that the name of Giuseppe Luciani, before our conscience, cannot represent neither today or ever the candidate for democracy”].<sup>48</sup> On January 17, the conservative candidate, count Giacomo Lovatelli, won the seat.

As political newspapers, *La capitale* and *Il secolo* did not only give room to the eulogies of Garibaldi and his true followers, such as Raffaele. They also used their pages to distance

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<sup>45</sup> *Processo Luciani e coimputati*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Sarti, *I rappresentanti del Piemonte e d’Italia*, 804.

<sup>47</sup> Dated February 4<sup>th</sup>, it appeared in the issue of *Il secolo*, Friday–Saturday February 5–6 1875, N.3159, “Lettere romane. Minghetti, Garibaldi, Brioschi,” 1: “in quel medesimo giorno di domenica 7 febbraio, è probabile abbia luogo il pranzo che gli Elettori democratici di Trastevere intendono dare al loro candidato Francesco Cucchi, per dimostrargli che la non riescita della sua candidatura avvenne non per colpa loro, ma in conseguenza della cabale che falsi democratici ordirono d’accordo colla Prefettura e coi più esosi conservatori.”

<sup>48</sup> *La capitale*, Thursday–Friday, January 14–15, 1.

themselves from “fake” democrats such as Luciani and to denounce them as traitors of the democratic cause.<sup>49</sup> In the case of Luciani, this operation eventually succeeded (not just thanks to the printed word). When his trial closed with a guilty verdict, and a life sentence, for five out of the six defendants, the flamboyant Luciani effectively disappeared from the public scene. Whereas during the trial Luciani was the most verbally aggressive and prolific of the defendants, so much so that both jury and public reportedly grew tired of his tirades, from his prison cell Luciani never took part in the publication frenzy. There exists no memorial or prison writing that would give us his version of the events and shed light on Luciani’s alleged ties to Roman bankers and to the right-wing politicians that, according to the Sonzogno family and to *Il secolo*, wanted Raffaele dead as much as, if not more than, Luciani himself.<sup>50</sup>

Nor do we, after the trial, ever hear again about the third protagonist of this story, the executor of the crime, Pio Frezza. On the evening of February 6, 1875, when the young man walked up the stairs of the building on Via dei Cesarini, and entered the newspaper’s offices, an unannounced, nightly visit by a working-class man to *La capitale*’s newsroom was not, in itself, something surprising or bound to alarm journalist Raffaele Sonzogno. It was entirely within the realm of possibility that Frezza was coming to relate a bit of local news, to inform the newspaper of some juicy event in one of Rome’s populous neighborhoods.

Indeed, according to Frezza’s trial deposition, this is exactly what the “manager” of the murder, Cornelio Farina—the mediator between Luciani’s plan and Frezza’s actions—told him to say in case he found Sonzogno with other people: “Farina mi aveva detto che se ci fosse qualcuno su, dicessi che aveva un articolo da mettere sul giornale” [“Farina had told me that if there was anyone up there, I would tell them I had a piece to put in the paper”].<sup>51</sup> When he found himself in front of Sonzogno alone, Frezza did not speak: “Lui, il Sonzogno, era solo e in piedi nella sua camera. Quando mi vide, mi chiese cosa volessi. Io non aveva più fiato, e gli menai un colpo” [“He, Sonzogno, was alone and standing in his room. When he saw me, he asked me what I wanted. I had no more breath, and I struck him”] (9). Frezza stabbed him thirteen times, first in the director’s office and then on the stairs, as Sonzogno tried to defend himself and at the same time to hold onto his assailant. Alerted by their boss’s screams, two typographers arrived in time to apprehend Frezza, and to witness Sonzogno’s death.

Pio Frezza, called “Spaghetto,” was a 26-year-old married, unemployed carpenter, an illiterate inhabitant of Trastevere, one of the neighborhoods that had been fast developing in the capital, and that harbored a historically rebellious contingent of working-class, small artisans and day laborers.<sup>52</sup> They were almost overwhelmingly democratic, republican, and anti-clerical.<sup>53</sup> Frezza was a well-liked, respected inhabitant of his neighborhood. Indeed, as early as February 18, *Il secolo* reported that, even though Frezza was undoubtedly guilty of the heinous, cold-blooded murder of Sonzogno, “tutti i testimoni conoscenti del Frezza e che furono chiamati a deporre sulle sue qualità personali, sulla sua condotta e sulla sua vita intima di figlio e di marito, fecero tutti unanimemente deposizioni a lui favorevolissime” [“all the witnesses that knew Frezza and who were called to testify about his personal qualities, his conduct and his personal

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<sup>49</sup> Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 388.

<sup>50</sup> For example, from the trial it emerged that, before being arrested in Rome for the murder, Luciani had met with Luigi De Luca, a financier close to the Banca Romana. De Luca regularly contributed funds to his electoral campaigns—even though they were, in theory, ideologically opposed.

<sup>51</sup> *Processo Luciani e coimputati*, 9

<sup>52</sup> *Processo, dibattito e sentenza*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> At the trial, several of the Trastevere locals refused to give their oath of truth on the Gospel, creating confusion (and some hilarity) in the court.



life as a son and a husband unanimously made depositions which were greatly in his favor”].<sup>54</sup> Such unanimity was not the product of local loyalty or *omertà*, but rather a reflection on Frezza’s character and integrity.

Frezza was also close to the popular committee of non voters—“Comitato dei non elettori,” of which his accomplice Morelli was a member—which had supported Luciani’s nomination for Garibaldi’s seat in January. Due to the undemocratic electoral law that had been ushered in with the Unification, voting rights were still income- and literacy-based, and included only about 3% of the population, or about half a million people, “in gran parte astensionisti” [“largely abstainers”].<sup>55</sup> The committees were formed by people who did not have a right to vote, but who wanted to contribute to the selection of the candidates. They participated in meetings and distributed promotional material, thus carving for themselves a simulacrum of political agency out of their outsiders’ status.

In writing on the marginal, less visible neighborhoods of Rome in *Italy’s Margins*, David Forgacs argues that the inhabitants of such places were most often “*objects* of representation for [these] writers and photographers, rather than *subjects* who could take control of representations of themselves.”<sup>56</sup> While Forgacs is writing about San Lorenzo, and about traces left by these subjects in photographs commissioned for Urban Renewal Campaigns, Pio Frezza’s presence in Raffaele Sonzogno’s story should be read in the same way, as the unseen, and yet visible, third pole of the rhetorical construction of a unified Italy that did not factually think of Frezza, and of people like him, as political subjects, but rather treated them more like evidence, and/or like the easily manipulated violent arm of causes that they could not fully verbalize or contest. Whereas *La capitale*’s politics of “accessibility” (both literally and in terms of content) might be read as one of the few sustained efforts on the part of the establishment to include the “other” in the discursive organization of Italy, Frezza was ultimately able to participate in the public sphere only in a manipulated, criminal way.

At the trial it appeared quickly that he had been chosen by Farina and his two accomplices, Michele Armati and Luigi Morelli, because “è un giovane che ama la patria” [“he is a young man who loves his country”], and he was persuaded by the three men that killing Sonzogno would be the ultimate patriotic duty.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, according to the witnesses and to Luciani’s own deposition, Luciani’s accomplices convinced Frezza, a proven radical and Garibaldian to his core, to kill Sonzogno by insisting that the murder was to be carried out “[p]er ordine di Garibaldi e dei Deputati del parlamento” [“by order of Garibaldi and the Parliament’s Deputies”], that is, that the General himself wanted Sonzogno dead. (12).

In Frezza’s deposition, the different elements that gave rhetorical substance to such an intimation were gathered in a striking “package” in which Sonzogno’s present and past, and Garibaldi’s Risorgimento ideals and current political projects, were gathered into a coherent, if false, narrative prepared to direct Frezza’s actions:

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<sup>54</sup> *Il secolo*, Friday–Saturday February 19–20 1875, “Lettere romane,” 1.

<sup>55</sup> Giacomo Perticone, *L’Italia contemporanea. 1871–1948* (Milan: Mondadori, 1962), 48. As Banti writes in an essay translated in English, “[l]ike their counterparts elsewhere, Italian liberals had a strong elitist notion of representation; for example, only the so-called best, that is, the rich and educated, had the right to vote,” 43. Alberto Banti, “Public Opinion and Associations in Nineteenth-Century Italy” in *Civil Society before Democracy: Lessons from Nineteenth-Century Europe*, eds. Nancy Bermeo and Philip Nord (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 43–59.

<sup>56</sup> David Forgacs, *Italy’s Margins. Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 19.

<sup>57</sup> *Processo Luciani e coimputati*, 12.

Farina adunque mi disse: C'è da fare un colpo; bisogna uccidere Sonzogno. —Ma perché? Io domandai. —Perché, mi rispose il Farina, Sonzogno quando era a Milano faceva la spia (*mormorio*) agli Austriaci recando danno all'Italia, ma lo fa altresì ora col suo giornale [...]—Farina soggiunse che Garibaldi aveva progettato la deviazione del Tevere, e che Sonzogno vi si opponeva col suo giornale, per il che lo stesso Sonzogno faceva danno non solo a Roma, ma altresì all'Italia, e si opponeva anche alle vedute del generale Garibaldi.

[Then Farina told me: there is a hit to be made; it is necessary to kill Sonzogno. — But why? I asked. —Because, Farina replied to me, when he lived in Milan Sonzogno was a spy (*whispers*) to the Austrians, damaging Italy, but he also does it now with his newspaper [...]—Farina added that Garibaldi had planned the deviation of the Tiber, and that Sonzogno opposed it with his newspaper, for which Sonzogno did damage not only to Rome, but also to Italy, and he also opposed General Garibaldi's views.] (8)

According to Farina, Sonzogno was opposed to Garibaldi's reclamation project and the General's views, and was damaging the nation with his newspaper. Farina also revived the accusations that the conservative newspaper *La perseveranza* had leveled against Sonzogno as "austriacante" ["pro-Austrian"] in 1869. (At the time, four letters signed by Raffaele in 1859, in which he courted the Austrian emperor and deferred to his authority, had resurfaced in Milan.) Farina's deliberate accumulation of anti-patriotic charges against Sonzogno thus successfully swayed young Frezza towards action. Frezza's reaction to Farina's words, as recorded in his deposition, was tied to an emotional compulsion to obey and defend Garibaldi from all attacks, "Io, quando intesi a nominare Garibaldi, mi sentii un fremito, un convulso" ["I, when I heard the name of Garibaldi, felt a thrill, a convulsion"], as well as to Frezza's ignorance (8). When Farina mentioned Sonzogno's newspaper, which supposedly was arguing against the "risanamento" project, Frezza replied by stating his illiteracy: "Io non leggo giornali, né so leggere né scrivere, quindi ignoravo queste cose" ["I don't read newspapers, nor do I know how to read or write, so I ignored all of these things"] (8). While Sonzogno's Garibaldi embodied the hopes for a non-corrupt, radically progressive Italy, Frezza's Sonzogno has been produced as the enemy of Garibaldi, and of those same hopes.

Frezza's only defense in the face of the unassailable truth of his material role in the murder was to reiterate his estranged relationship with words and with the complex network of political rhetoric to which he fell victim. When asked if he ever took part in Farina and Morelli's political discourses in the months preceding the murder, Frezza replied that he never did: "io non mi ci mischiavo molto, perchè sono poco istruito ed uomo di poche parole" ["I did not mingle in it much, because I am not very educated and a man of few words"] (8). He was unaware of the degree to which Raffaele Sonzogno and he were actually ideologically aligned; when he met Sonzogno in person, he did not offer the newspaperman any piece of news about life in Trastevere; he was sent to literally and materially make news.

It might be useful, before closing, to articulate more precisely the extent to which Frezza's violence was co-opted by way of a manipulation of the historical and journalistic record in respect to Sonzogno's life. The accusation of being pro-Austrian was a stain in Sonzogno's past that he had long sought to erase. In 1869, within the climate of *ad personam* attacks that I have

earlier described, and as “payback” for the violent attacks that the Sonzognos had leveled against *La perseveranza* in previous years, *La perseveranza* had built a case against Raffaele. Bonghi, the director, had declared himself in possession of four letters written by Sonzogno proving him to have been a pro-Austrian agent in 1859 as Italy was being made. Sonzogno, who had built his reputation on his patriotic deeds, denied the very existence of the letters, and took the hostile periodical to trial. When the letters were publicly shown, while they were not incriminating in themselves, they created an unsustainable embarrassment for Raffaele, who lost the trial. It was, indeed, because of that humiliation that Sonzogno left Milan, as well as his seat in Parliament as a Democratic representative, and moved to Rome on September 1870.

That this accusation of being pro-Austrian would resurface in the days leading up to Frezza’s actions points in the direction of a well-orchestrated press operation. In early February, as Giuseppe Luciani started arguing with Michele Armati and Luigi Morelli that Sonzogno was behaving in an unpatriotic way, and that it was necessary to eliminate him, Luciani organized a visit for “non elettori Trasteverini” [“non-voters from Trastevere”], including Armati, Morelli, and Farina, to meet Garibaldi in person (10–11). During this visit, Garibaldi spoke in very derogatory terms of the Austrians, as he was known to do. In the meantime, on February 1, an anonymous telegram was published by an Austrian newspaper in Vienna, and a few days later by *La Perseveranza* in Milan, which read: “Garibaldi ricusò di ricevere Raffaele Sonzogno, direttore della *Capitale* (giornale ultra radicale), che voleva fargli visita” [“Garibaldi refused to receive Raffaele Sonzogno, the director of *La capitale* (an ultra-radical paper), who wanted to visit him”] (37).<sup>58</sup> The fake news of Garibaldi’s refusal to meet Sonzogno circulated in the press, renewing the debate over his allegiances and his patriotism. And in the minds of people whom Luciani was working to persuade to murder a man, such news became indelibly associated with Garibaldi’s own vehement anti-Austrian rhetoric, to finally become the patriotic motive that justified such a crime.<sup>59</sup>

In the three subjects—agents or victims—of this murder we can ultimately read three “realistic,” if contradictory, facets of the Garibaldinian heritage. Sonzogno, Luciani and Frezza embody, respectively: (1) the patriotic, democratic, and commercially shrewd publisher; (2) the fervent revolutionary, turning into a corrupt politician; and (3) the disenfranchised populace, holding on to pre-Unification democratic ideals on account of being barred from any other political (or imaginary) participation. In the web of printed and spoken words that purportedly gave him agency, Frezza’s post-Unification role is the same as that which would have been allotted to him during the Risorgimento era—the arm blindly executing the orders of his general. Frezza excludes himself from any other imagined community than the Risorgimental one. To his ears, there is only one true signifier: Garibaldi, whose resonance is more sacred and propitiatory than merely narrative or verbal. Frezza’s way of reading his crime thus brings him back to the sacralized violence of the nationalist cause; he can justify it to himself only in Risorgimental terms, because it was packaged to him as such, and because that is the only political role he was allowed to take on within the elitist, non-democratic form of parliamentary monarchy that was the Kingdom of Italy at the time.

Lucy Riall, in her assessment of the cult and myth of Garibaldi in the 19th century, argues that “the original purpose of the cult was to embody and publicize a political sense of *italianità*, to identify an imaginary narrative of romantic heroism with a living, military leader, and to

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<sup>58</sup> It was published in *La perseveranza* on February 4.

<sup>59</sup> See on this the official indictment, “Atto d’accusa” reported in the opening of *Processo Luciani e coimputati*, 3–6, esp. 4.

encourage Italians to ‘regenerate’ themselves.”<sup>60</sup> She also points out that, “after the Unification of Italy, the heroic image of Garibaldi was at once the most prominent and persuasive symbol of the new Italy, and a constant reminder of its varied disappointments” (389). Garibaldianism, in other words, becomes an overarching rhetorical and cultural legacy that different subjects appropriate in wildly different ways. What is striking is the remarkable durability of this ideological trope, of a signifier that varies its signified so dramatically from one person to the next. And while the variability of this signifier has been studied at length, in the ways in which fascism appropriated it, for example, the Sonzogno affair is in my view the most astonishing case of Garibaldianism deliberately used against itself in the Liberal years.<sup>61</sup>

The lead-up to Raffaele Sonzogno’s murder coalesced the history of this man of the Left, one of the most important newspaper men of his time, and that of a Trastevere carpenter, an anonymous *popolano*, into a paradoxical trap: the old judicial history of Sonzogno’s relationship with the Austrians during the Risorgimento period; Garibaldi’s overarching presence as both the incarnation of the Risorgimento ideals (with his outspoken hatred of Austrians) and his more contradictory attempts to forge a new politics of the Left (with his double candidacy, and his “risanamento” project); the heavily partisan, *ad personam* nature of the attacks on the part of Italian press organizations (and their use of fake news); as well as Raffaele’s commitment to both welcome and exploit the words and stories of a previously ignored audience.

There is a dramatic circularity in the relationship between crime, newspapers and politics in this story: the moral responsibility of Sonzogno’s death falls in part on the adversary paper, *La perseveranza*, because *La perseveranza*’s long-standing enmity towards Sonzogno was clearly manipulated and exploited by Sonzogno’s “new” enemy, his fellow Garibaldian Luciani. While the author of the fake telegram was never identified, it was very likely Luciani himself. Luciani was an experienced *pubblicista* and knew the weak spots of liberal and conservative journalism. Conversely, the man Frezza killed embodied—even with his own ideological ambiguities and blind spots—one of the few sustained attempts, in the early years of Liberal Italy, to substantially reach and politically involve the people, the silent majority, in the works of both letters and politics. In addition to his press commitment, in which he had repeatedly called for broad educational reforms, in his brief stint as parliamentarian in 1869 (X Legislature), Raffaele Sonzogno was among the first political figures of Unified Italy to propose an extension of voting rights to all literate citizens regardless of census status (including “i non contribuenti, escludendo soltanto gli analfabeti” [“the non-wage earners, excluding only illiterates”]).<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

It is tempting to argue that Sonzogno’s death and the murder plot uncovered and mediatized right after symbolize the death of the democratic dream for the Italian nation, as well as an explicit rebuttal to the hopes that Risorgimento ideals would find a political place in Unified Italy. After all, Garibaldi himself quit his seat as deputy very quickly thereafter, “deluso già nel maggio” [“disappointed already in May”] 1875 by the government’s operations.<sup>63</sup> However, as I have shown, the Sonzogno *affair* is to be understood as, first, a litmus test of the kind of commercial

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<sup>60</sup> Riall, *Garibaldi. Invention of a Hero*, 388.

<sup>61</sup> On Garibaldianism, see the volume edited by Filippo Mazzonis, *Garibaldi condottiero, Storia, teoria, prassi* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1984), as well as Claudio Fogu, *The Historic Imaginary: Politics of History in Fascist Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

<sup>62</sup> Sarti, *I rappresentanti del Piemonte e d'Italia*, 803.

<sup>63</sup> Barile, *Il secolo*, 65.

exploitation and proliferation that the national news industry made possible, of its strength and vitality, so to speak. Secondly, it should be examined as part of a moment of high visibility for Left-leaning politics in the early years of the Unification era, one that exposed the fragility and ideological paradoxes of such politics, but did not obliterate the possibility of a governmental democracy. What is certain is that while the freedom of press acquired with the Unification opened the doors to the creation of an industrial-press landscape, a modern public sphere, and a broader public opinion, the national project of both the press and Parliamentary representatives appeared in this story marred in substantial opacity and in a persuasion that the best way to operate was by way of the manipulation of the masses.

As he was arrested and searched, in Frezza's pockets were found two pieces of promotional material: a fragment of paper bearing the words "Non eleggete il" (which was recognized as part of an electoral ad against Francesco Cucchi, Luciani's primary adversary in January 1875, that read in full: "Non eleggete il deputato Francesco Cucchi di Bergamo" ["Don't elect the deputy Francesco Cucchi from Bergamo"]), and a small "cartoncino" ["piece of cardboard"] that read: "Romani! Se vi sta a cuore l'onore e l'interesse di Roma, date il voto a Giuseppe Luciani, romano" ["Romans! If you care about Rome's honor and interests, give your vote to Giuseppe Luciani, a Roman"].<sup>64</sup> While the investigation into Sonzogno's murder slowly circled upwards from Frezza to his material accomplices (Armati and Farina), then to the person who had found him a weapon (Morelli) and to the weapon's originary owner (Scarpelli, the only one of the six defendants who was released at the end of the trial), and only later, a month after the facts, to Giuseppe Luciani, the structural motives behind his tragedy could be literally found in his pockets: scraps of paper that he could not read because of his illiteracy, and a call to electoral action to which he would never participate, for he had no right to vote.

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<sup>64</sup> The transcription can be found with slight variations in most trial accounts. I am transcribing the most "annotated" version, as found in *Processo per l'assassinio di Raffaele Sonzogno contro Luciani, Frezza e coimputati Armati, Scarpelli, Morelli e Farina* (Milan–Naples: F. Pagnoni, 1875), 7.